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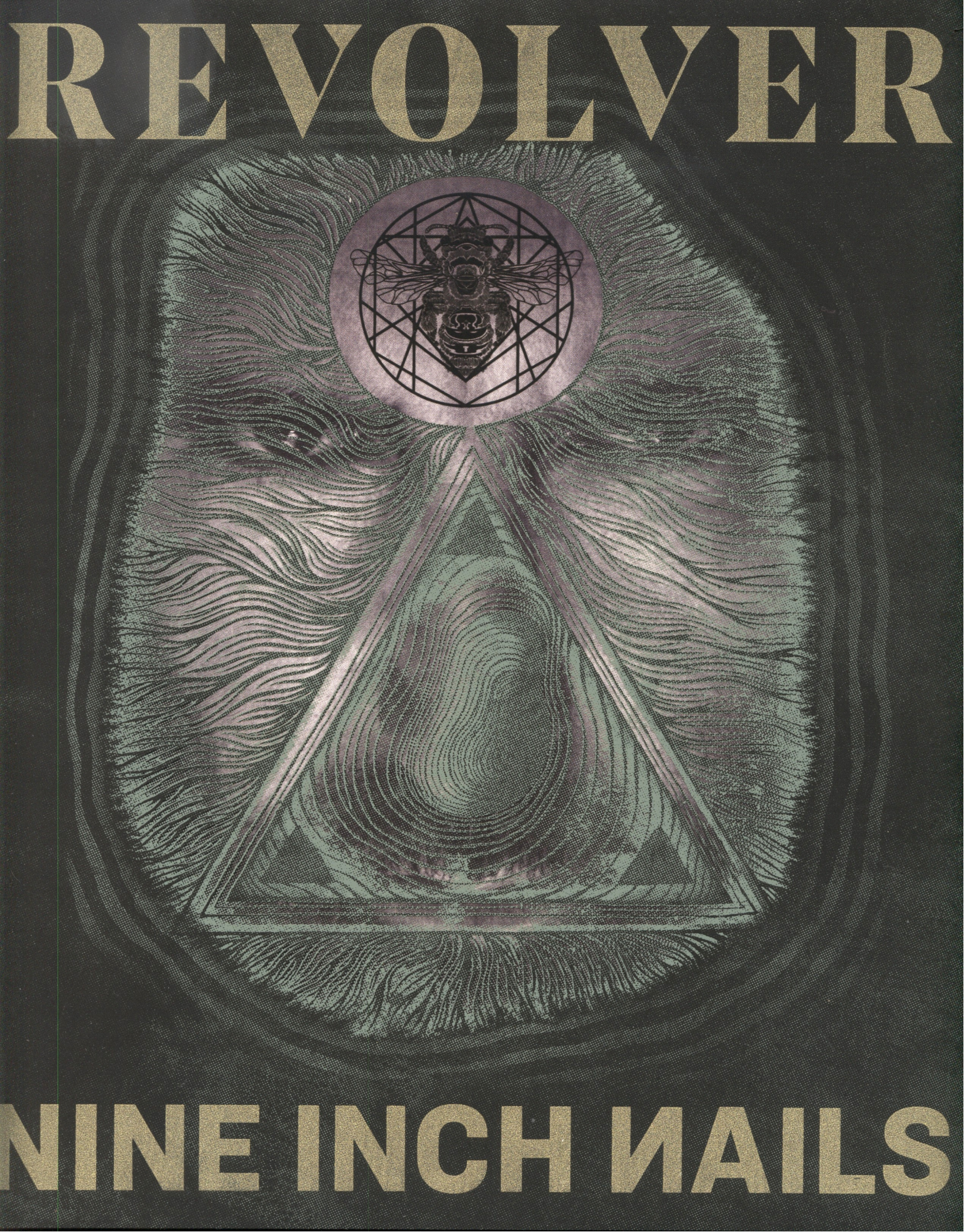

NINE INCH NAILS

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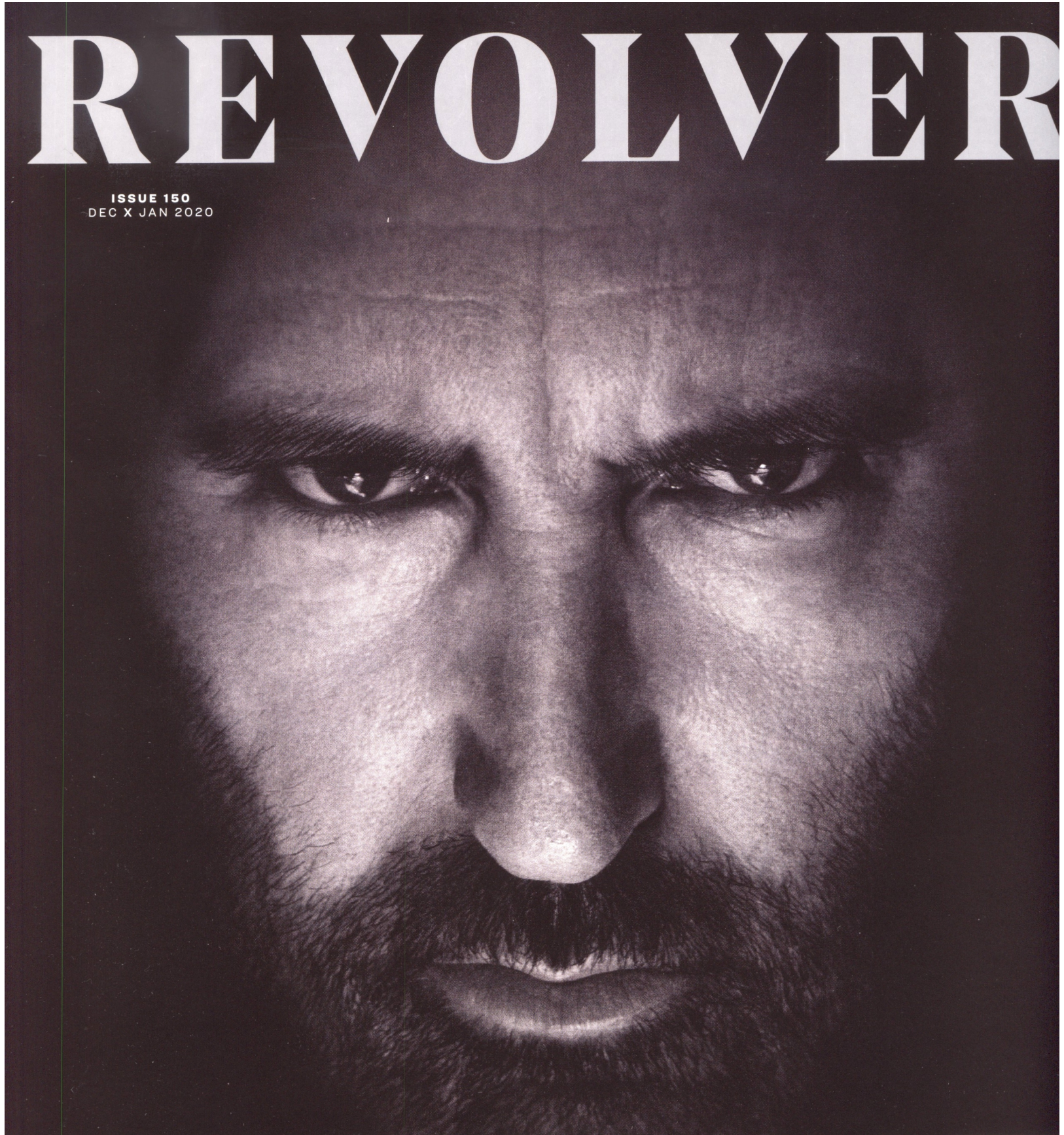

NINE INCH NAILS

Higher Power // Poppy // Rage Against the Machine // Microwave // Ryan Matthew Cohn
Refused // Gatecreeper // Twin Temple // Heavy-Metal Sign Language // Orthodox

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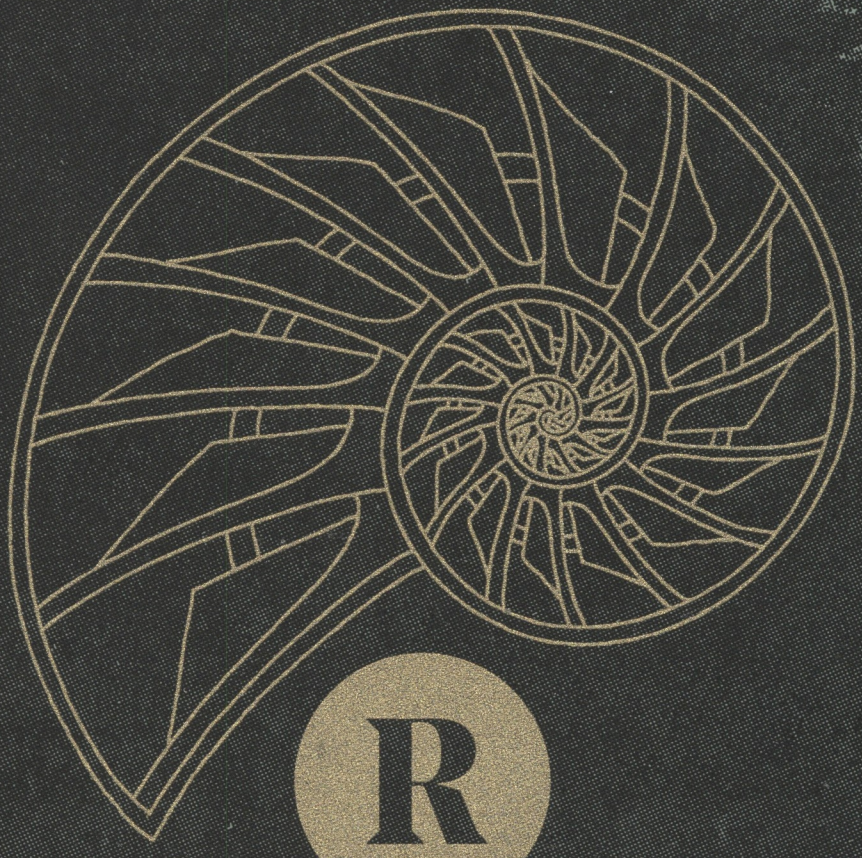

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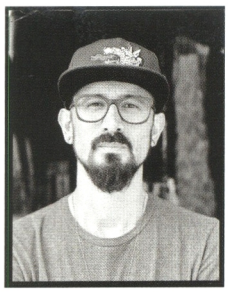
Apprehension Engines and Organismic Synthesizers: Inside Trent Reznor's magic workshop

COVER PHOTOGRAPHY John Crawford



WE'VE BEEN CHASING TRENT REZNOR FOR TWO YEARS. NOT *ACTUALLY* CHASING him, of course. Not like he chased David Bowie in the "I'm Afraid of Americans" music video — though we might have, if given the opportunity.

The joke around *Revolver* HQ is that Trent has been "our white whale." Seriously, I've pitched a Trent/NIN cover for every other issue of *Revolver* since we relaunched the brand in 2017, knowing that, at least in the beginning, the odds of a positive response were low, but confident that eventually he would see what we're doing — if we kept it up and stuck to our guns — and say yes.

Because, on a larger level, we've been chasing Trent in another way, too. Since relaunching *Revolver*, we've strived to make something with real vision and a real voice that lives up to the standard of high quality and deep integrity that Trent has upheld over the last 30 years, from *Pretty Hate Machine* all the way to his and Atticus Ross' scores for *The Watchmen*, *Waves* and more. When Nine Inch Nails recently announced the new "definitive edition" of *With Teeth*, Trent, Atticus and NIN art director John Crawford described it as being put together "with lots of details attended to that you may never notice but we care about." Which is exactly how we put together each issue of *Revolver*.

When Trent talks in this issue's cover story about the compulsion to work on things that you find interesting and the satisfaction in completing something you think is "fucking great" and the desire to share it and connect with others through it — we can relate. Chances are, you can, too. It's inspiring to see that, even with all his successes, he's still chasing something. We all should be.

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VANGUARD

Trent Reznor, Los Angeles , 2019

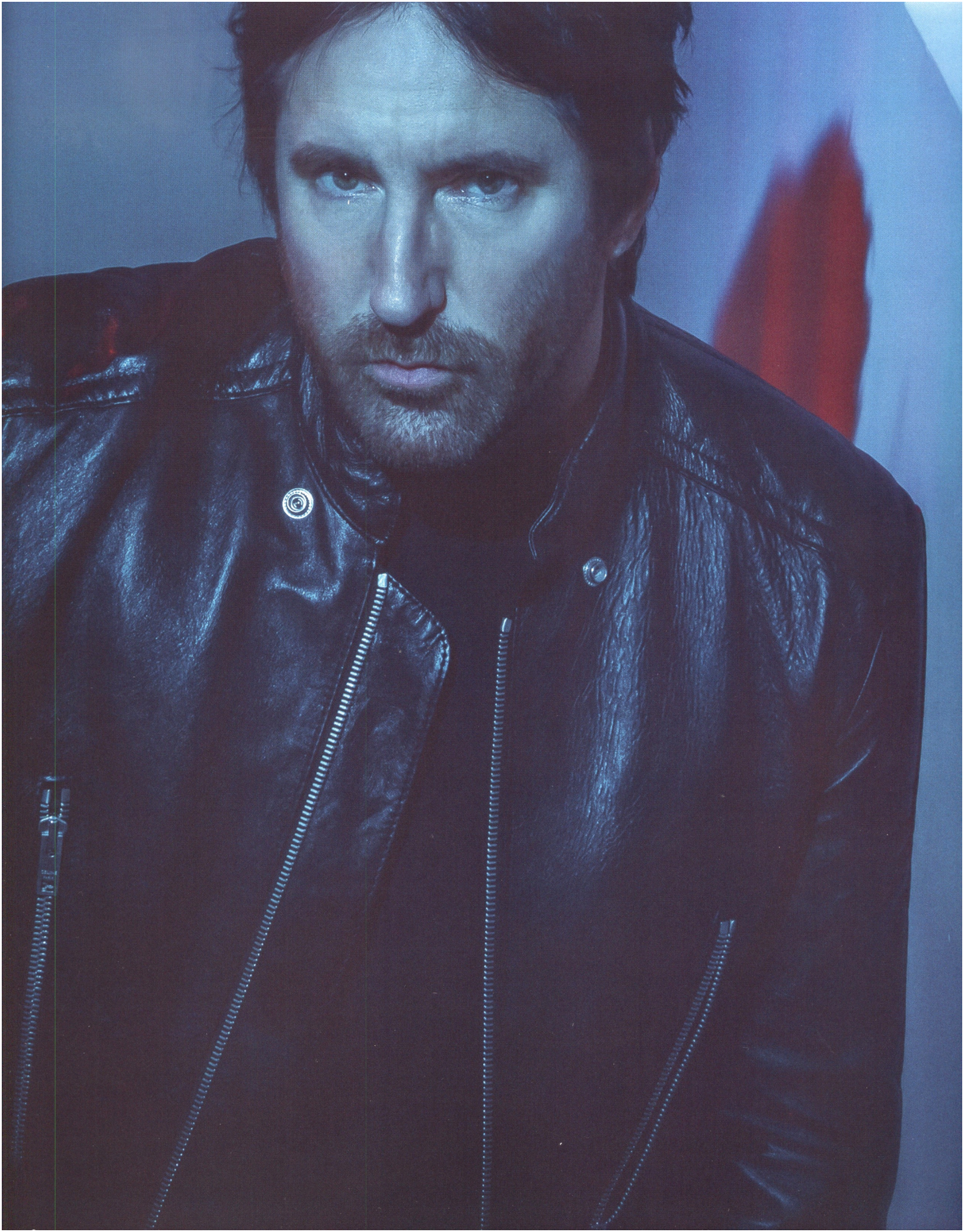
REBELS, INNOVATORS AND ICONOCLASTS

NINE INCH NAILS

Trent Reznor welcomes us into his new studio for a deep dive into the past, present and future of one of rock and electronic music's most revolutionary forces

TEXT
Christopher R. Weingarten

PHOTOGRAPHY
John Crawford



"I'LL SHOW YOU SOMETHING ELSE COOL WE GOT,"

SAYS TRENT REZNOR, LEAVING THE MIXING ROOM OF HIS WARMLY LIT, SMOKY incense-scented West Los Angeles studio. "You seen *The Lighthouse*?"

The Nine Inch Nails leader steps into the hallway and crouches down to show off the Apprehension Engine, an unruly, all-angles nightmare simulator co-created by Mark Korven, composer of the score for the claustrophobic arthouse-horror film *The Lighthouse* — retail price, $10,000. The wooden monstrosity looks like H.P. Lovecraft designed a steampunk's double-necked guitar. Reznor puts on his glasses and shows off its various cranks, rulers, springs, strings and coils.

"You can bow these things." *Boiiiiiing*. "There's no right or wrong way to use it." *Slapapapapapap*. *Eeeeeeeee*. "And they tell you when you get it, it really requires you learning how to play it and figure it out. It pissed us off 'cause when we got it ... it sounds shitty. I'm not instantly good at it."

The Apprehension Engine lives in Reznor's new studio space, its surfaces lined with various noisy electronic doodads that you brush or bow or touch or chomp with banana clips. Though there's no shortage of traditional synthesizers, Reznor and longtime musical co-conspirator Atticus Ross often use bespoke, small-run noisemakers, glitchers and squawkers from boutique companies and independent designers. There's the "fairly unplayable" Swarmatron (used to help create their score to 2010's *The Social Network*), the weed-like Luminist Garden (used for rhythms on 2014's *Gone Girl*) and the teeny touchpads of the Organismic Synthesizer from Moscow's SOMA Laboratory (it didn't come with a manual, so Reznor pulls out printouts of text messages from the lab's founder).

"As much as I love the romantic idea of going to a real studio where there's a receptionist and you sense the cocaine residue in the couches, it's impractical for how we work," says Reznor, who moved in about eight months ago. "We kind of need access to our warehouse of toys."

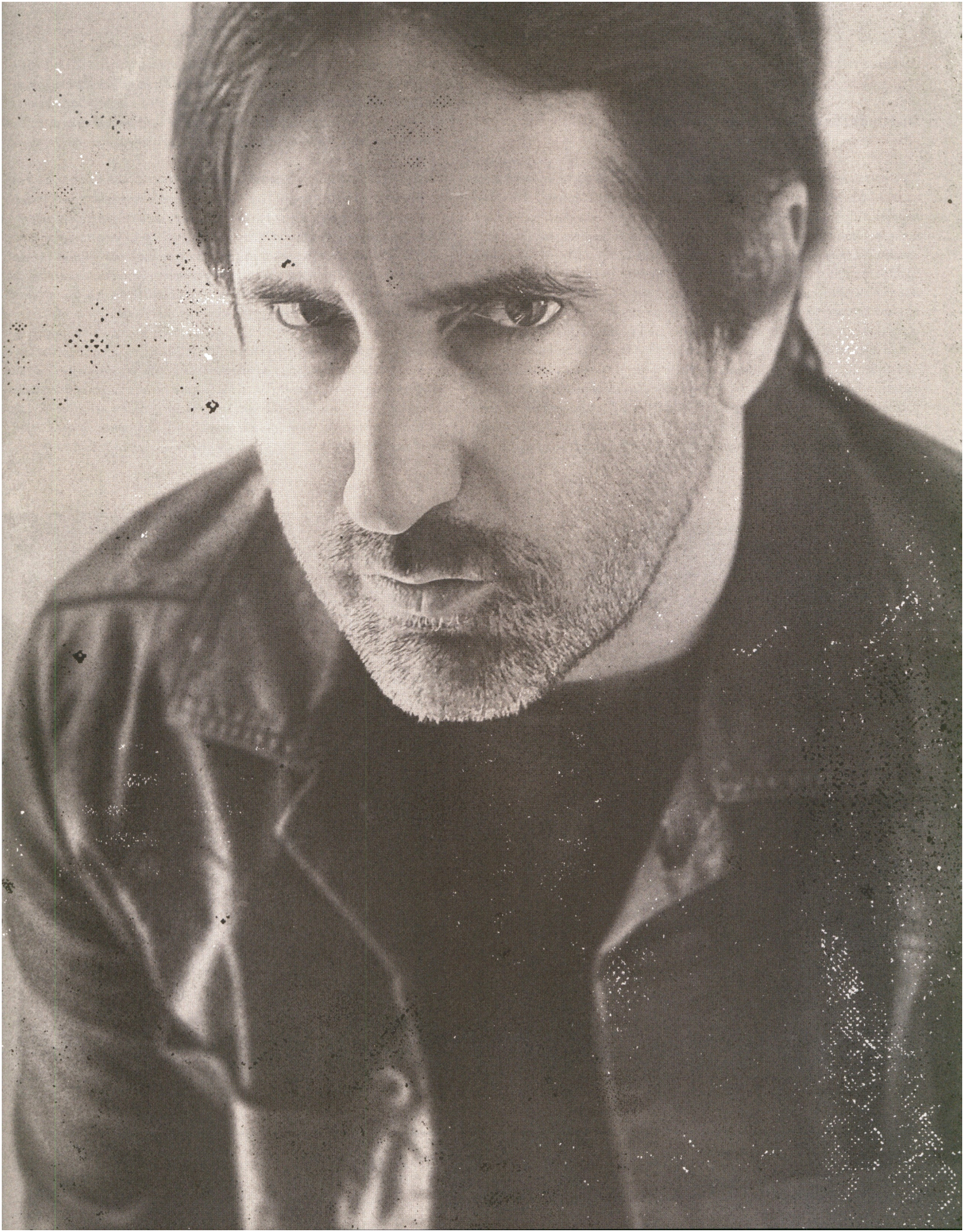
Together, Reznor and Ross have worked on eight released film scores, two TV scores and the last six Nine Inch Nails albums, a 15-year partnership that combines atmosphere and melody, ambience and noise. They've won an Oscar, a Golden Globe, a Grammy and — in an improbable turn of events — a Country Music Association Award thanks to being sampled on Lil Nas X's record-breaking "Old Town Road." Both Reznor and Ross emerged from the screeching, pulsating, bloodletting man-machine universe of Nineties industrial rock, and have brought their curiosity for unique sonic textures from stage to screen. They're currently working on the score to Pixar's 22nd animated emotional roller coaster, *Soul*. But Nine Inch Nails is not forgotten: The band recently released "the definitive edition" of its 2005 album *With Teeth*, and in 2020, Reznor and Ross plan to take the group back out on tour, as well as record new NIN music.

The studio where we meet up with them is Reznor's first since his famed New Orleans spot Nothing Studios closed its doors in 2004. Much of Nine Inch Nails' work since then has been in rentals, hotel rooms and the two-car garage of his old place in Beverly Hills.

"When I was a bachelor, whatever house I was living in was the studio with a bed in the corner," says Reznor. "[Now] there's kids and maybe they don't feel like hearing that drumbeat all day long."

From parenthood to CMA awards, a lot has changed for Reznor since he released *Pretty Hate Machine* 30 years ago. In a wide-ranging conversation, he and Ross discuss process, collaboration and the search for meaning.

GROOMING: HAIELY ADICKES/CELESTINE AGENCY



I IMAGINE THAT YOU MIGHT HAVE TO WRITE SOME HAPPY MUSIC FOR PIXAR.
TRENT REZNOR Yeah. There's some happy stuff in there.

THINKING BACK ON YOUR 30-YEAR CATALOG AND ...
REZNOR That box isn't that ticked, is it? [*Laughs*]

CAN YOU TALK A LITTLE BIT ABOUT HAVING TO TAP INTO THAT EMOTION?
REZNOR When [director David] Fincher asked us to do *Social Network*. ... I made an important discovery. Atticus and I went and saw a rough cut of the film. We drove home, we were in the same car. And we're like, "What the fuck are we gonna do, man?" 'Cause it's not obvious what this music's going to sound like. I don't even know where you'd fit music in there. It's just people talking. We really like Fincher, but you don't wanna fuck his movie up. And our bluff is called. Should we go woodshed? I'll call up Hans Zimmer, can we hang out for a little while and just kind of watch what you do? Is there a master class or a TED talk or some shit we can quickly absorb?

And then we thought, why don't we just see what happens if we do it like we're writing music. ... Let's say I think about the character of Mark Zuckerberg, not the real guy, who he is in *Social Network*. He believes in this idea enough that he thinks it's important, [that] you can betray friends. And at the end, it kind of works, but feels kind of shitty. Hey, I know what that feels like. How would that sound? And it worked. As obvious as that sounds, I didn't understand that until we kind of figured that out.

We've been fans of Pixar and when we were approached, it's like, Could we do that? I don't know. We should try. ... I mean, I'll be honest with you, it's been challenging and it's been anxiety. We kind of got on the wrong track the first couple of runs we took at it, because we were trying to sound like a Pixar movie. And that's not why they hired us. [But] I don't think they want a Coil album. Bowel-churning. I don't think? [*Laughs*]

THE GRITTY PIXAR REBOOT. DAVID CRONENBERG'S *CARS 4* ...
REZNOR Yeah, exactly. [*Laughs*] That would look pretty cool, though, wouldn't it?
ATTICUS ROSS We actually had to prove that we could be optimistic. You can't ultimately abandon who you are. Whatever we do, there's a kind of aesthetic that runs through, and that same aesthetic can apply to the more optimistic side of ourselves. Basically, we wrote about an hour of optimistic music inspired by [the early *Soul* concepts] ... that they really liked. I think that that was a kind of test of, "Can these people actually do happy things?"

BUT YOU'VE BEEN ABLE TO DO "HAPPY"?
REZNOR I think so, yeah. And it's been kind of fun. The next Fincher movie, he's asked us to do. *Mank* [*about Herman J. Mankiewicz, the screenwriter of Orson Welles'* Citizen Kane]. All done, 1940. All right, so we're not gonna be using the modular synthesizer on that one. We think we're gonna be period authentic, so it just creates a new set of challenges.

Atticus Ross

WHEN YOU RELEASED NINE INCH NAILS' *GHOSTS I-IV* IN 2008, IT FELT LIKE A COOL TRIFLE FROM A FAMOUS MUSICIAN. A FOUR-LP AMBIENT ALBUM THAT COULD GO RIGHT TO THE FANS. BUT ULTIMATELY, IT ENDED UP CHANGING YOUR CAREER PATH ENTIRELY.

REZNOR It seems that way, yeah.

WHEN DID YOU REALIZE THIS EXPERIMENT WOULD BE A LIFE-CHANGING PART OF YOUR WORK?

REZNOR You know, we worked on *Social Network* and when we were doing it, we felt immense pride in working with Fincher and his team. ... And you're collaborating probably for the first time in a real true collaboration. We're not driving the ship, but we're contributing in a way that was meaningful. We'd never even, for a second, thought about awards, that didn't cross anybody's mind. And it was a nice, it was a nice way to finish that cycle out, like, Holy fuck, people *that know what they're doing* think what we did was good. That felt pretty cool. That was when you could retroactively go back and say, "Oh, Fincher liked that record."

It's fun when you're working with people that you respect. It's not fun when you're stuck on a turd.

DARE I ASK?

REZNOR We had a bad time with *Bird Box* [*the 2018 Netflix original film starring Sandra*

"It's fun when you're working with people that you respect. It's not fun when you're stuck on a turd." — Trent Reznor

"We knew onstage at Woodstock '94, whatever is happening, it felt like, This is important. We're right where we need to be, and this is it. And I don't mean that arrogantly. I just mean you could feel it in a weird way. I haven't felt it like that since then." — Reznor

Bullock]. We were sold a bill of goods that it was a psychological thriller and the director had a pedigree that was somewhat impressive. And when we got immersed in it, it felt like some people were phoning it in. And you're stuck with a film editor who had real bad taste. That's kind of our barricade to getting stuff in the film. And the final icing on the shit cake was we were on tour when they mixed it. And they mixed the music so low, you couldn't hear it anyway. So it was like, that was a [*laughs*] ... that was a fucking waste of time. Then we thought, No one's going to see this fucking movie. And, of course, it's the hugest movie ever in Netflix.

I STILL HAVEN'T SEEN IT.

REZNOR You're not missing anything.

YOU GUYS HAVE RELEASED 10 SCORES NOW. HAS ANYONE PUSHED BACK? SOMEONE FROM A MOVIE STUDIO SAYING, "THIS IS TOO MUCH. THIS IS TOO STRANGE."

REZNOR Truly, what is different about this than Nine Inch Nails is ... we are in service to the vision. We're a tool. We want to make your vision better, but it's your vision. So help us understand what that is. There's times when we don't agree with what that vision starts to become, but we don't feel like it's our role to kind of force [a] movie this way.

We signed on to do *Woman in the Window* with Joe Wright. We scored that whole film. We like Joe. He took a popular pulpy novel — we were pretty amazed when we saw the first cut that it was almost Lynchian. It's still an engaging thriller, but it had an arthouse sensibility to it that elevated it into being a little show-offy in its craftsmanship. It had style to it. It felt good. And we made an avant-garde score. There's moments where the main character's losing her mind and we made sure you felt like you're losing your mind in the midst of a panic attack. [The film] underwent a transformation after some testing audiences. And we decided not to continue.

There's no animosity on our end. It's frustrating when you did that much work and it's gone. And we were proud — and they were proud — of the movie that it was. Now it's transformed into a different movie. I'm not saying that's a bad movie, I haven't seen that movie. But the redirection was one of basically starting over. We did what we thought was right with the guidance of the director and now that external forces have weighed in, we couldn't go back in. And we were given the choice. So we just said, "We're going to bow out on that one."

FOR THE *PATRIOTS DAY* SCORE, YOU SAMPLED A DENTIST SCRAPING TEETH. HOW DOES A DECISION LIKE THAT EMERGE?

ROSS Well, the thought process was simply ... finding a percussive element. [The characters are] kind of on the run. They've done a terrible thing and you can imagine what kind of frame of mind they're in. So what would be the most unbearable [sound]? I think we were able through some kind of medical association or something to find some close recording of the teeth.

IT'S IN THE TRADITION OF *MUSIQUE CONCRÈTE*, BUT IT'S ALSO CINEMATIC.

ROSS The place where sound design and music meet has always been a place of great interest. And that can become especially interesting in film where you can actually use sounds that have been recorded for the film. On [2011's *The Girl With the*] *Dragon Tattoo*, before the blowjob scene, there's someone cleaning a floor. There's floor cleaners — *whirr whirr*. It was not innocuous but was just a thing that was going on before you got into this scenario of someone being forced to perform oral sex on their therapist. We thought, what if, using a graphic EQ, we were able to pull a note from that floor cleaner. Then that floor cleaner has a rhythm. And that became the start of the piece and was an intricate layer to the piece. So once you're in the office, you can still hear the floor cleaner in the back right there.

AS WITH NINE INCH NAILS' MUSIC, THERE'S A LOT OF ELEMENTS IN YOUR SCORES — DRONES AND FEEDBACK AND NOISE AND DISSONANCE — THAT A RECORD NERD COULD TRACE BACK TO AVANT-GARDE ARTISTS LIKE COIL, THROBBING GRISTLE AND WILLIAM BASINSKI. DO YOU FIND IT FUN OR SUBVERSIVE THAT YOU CAN TAKE THIS KNOWLEDGE OF CHALLENGING MUSIC AND TAKE THAT TO NETFLIX AND DISNEY?

REZNOR You know, it's cool to hear you say that, because I'm not consciously thinking about that anymore. It becomes kind of the vocabulary of our communication in this room. ... We try to start each project thinking, OK, what does this film need? What's the right instruments for that? Is it acoustic? Is it electronic? If it's electronic, is it analog and warm and out of tune-ish? Is it digital and precise and icy-ish? Is it acoustic-electric? One of the reasons we keep a shop full of stuff is, I know what that synth can bring to the table. I know what the one sitting over there does. Is this the band? And some of the things, like drones and noise, we learned a lot of that from listening to David Lynch movies. Why is *Eraserhead* so fuckin' unnerving at times? You're not realizing the room tone he's turned up so loud. That's not what the room actually sounds like. It is if you turn a mic up real loud, you start to hear the fan ... when all that stuff becomes exaggerated. Wow! Wonder what that would sound like in a pop song? Or a song where I'm trying to make you feel anxious?

"The Becoming" on [*Nine Inch Nails' 1994 breakthrough album,* The] *Downward Spiral*. We had a stereo sampler for the first time. I would just have myself and a couple guys that were around me watch movies with the TV off. Anytime anything sounds cool, just record it. We had some weird wailing women like, "*Ooooo-ohhhhh-ooohh!*" Something bad happening, right? With that looping under the whole song ... It just helped you feel, like, "Fuck this song! Ugh! Turn it off!" And that's what we wanted.

But we learn tricks like that, we learn processes like that, the Basinski-type tape degradation. I think there's a lot of artists [for whom] the process is the thing. And if you know the process, fuck, that's interesting. I don't really like what the sound is that came out the other end, but the process was cool. The Basinski process, to me, sounds nostalgic, and it reminds me of hissy cassettes and something that'd been worn out. ... We realize if we record certain things through that, they take on an emotional characteristic. That's the valuable part to us. So we're so many steps removed from where it came from, we're often not consciously thinking, "Man, we snuck that cool thing into this ... this big mainstream thing."

TRENT, YOU SAID THAT WHEN YOU FIRST HEARD "OLD TOWN ROAD," IT FELT A LITTLE WEIRD.

REZNOR I was here, got a phone call. "Hey, you got a call from a panicked manager of an up-and-coming kid. They have sampled *Ghosts*. They didn't get permission. They're not saying it isn't this. The track is starting to gain a little traction on Spotify's viral whatever the fuck. What's your thoughts?" I said, "Work it out. Don't stop it from happening. I don't give a fuck about that." I hadn't heard it or

even heard of it. Just work out whatever's fair. I know how fleeting fame and shit can be. And when the planets line up for whatever reason, you don't wanna get in the way of that. It wasn't like a Trump campaign or something.

They sent me a link and I listened to it. I didn't even listen to the whole thing. ... And then it just exploded, man. Then I actually listened to the whole thing a few times. I have a thing where if I hear a song, even if it's for 10 seconds in the car, two days later I wake up singing that song. It's always two days. And that one stuck in for quite some time and now it's made its way to where my kids are [playing] *Just Dance 2020* and they're performing aerobic workouts to "Old Town Road (Remix)."

ROSS My only hope was that it would stay No. 1 forever. There's 33 other tracks that people can happily sample away.

DO YOU GUYS KNOW WHERE YOU'RE GONNA PUT YOUR COUNTRY MUSIC ASSOCIATION AWARDS?

REZNOR I'm hopin' it's real big. Is it?

ROSS I'm gonna wear mine 'round my neck.

WHAT'S NEXT ON THE HORIZON FOR NINE INCH NAILS?

REZNOR We're talking about doing some shows next year, maybe. Probably in the last half of the year. We have a template for the next Nine Inch Nails thing we want to do. I don't want to give it away just yet, but we haven't been able to really execute because we fucked our schedule up this year.

ROSS It's been intense.

REZNOR It's been relentless film projects on top of each other. And, so, it's going to be a few more months before we can really kick into gear on that with a clear conscience.

WHAT MIGHT NEW NINE INCH NAILS SOUND LIKE?

REZNOR I'll give it away: collaboration. We've got a list of people we like. And we thought, kind of playing on the newfound spirit of collaboration that scoring has forced us into, seeing what happens when we mix our DNA with some other people, with a no-pressure environment. Let's see what happens. If something good happens, then maybe the world can hear it. But if it doesn't, we put it in the pile with the other ...

THAT SORT OF COLLABORATION WOULD BE FAR FROM WHERE YOU STARTED: YOU PLAYED ALL THE INSTRUMENTS ON *PRETTY HATE MACHINE* BESIDES DRUMS. YOU'VE SAID YOUR INSPIRATION TO DO THAT WAS PRINCE.

REZNOR Prince primarily. Todd Rundgren secondarily. And it was out of a pragmatic need. I wanted to have a band. I wanted to be in a club, and I wanted a gang. But I couldn't really find people in Cleveland that didn't want the instant gratification of trying to play out in clubs and whatever. And just fucking dealing with other people was a hassle.

This photo and far right: 1991

LEFT: NIELS VAN IPEREN/GETTY IMAGES

YOU ACTUALLY DID SORT OF MEET PRINCE ONCE.

REZNOR Kind of. A couple times kind of. One was a disappointing encounter at the Record Plant when we were working on *Downward Spiral*. Prince is in a studio down the hall, but no one had ever seen him. He'd never shown up. He was booked every day, but every day a phone call comes in and says, "Ah, OK, stay there. We're going to be in in a couple hours." "OK, now, he's going to have dinner. He's coming in later." "OK, he's going clubbing. He's going to come in after." "OK, he's not coming in, but be there at 10 in the morning." And that would continue for weeks.

We got to know their engineers because they were just sitting around waiting all day. And they said, "No, he knows you guys. He was listening to [*Nine Inch Nails' 1992 EP*] *Broken* and referencing, 'I want it to sound like that.'" I thought, This is fucking fantastic! My hero! And then one day, I was walking out, and he was walking in. And there was light behind him. It was daytime, and I could see a cane and high heels and a wave of perfume. And it was he and I walking, and it seemed like slow motion. And as soon as we got to each other, I look at him and ... he passed, and that was it. My heart was broken.

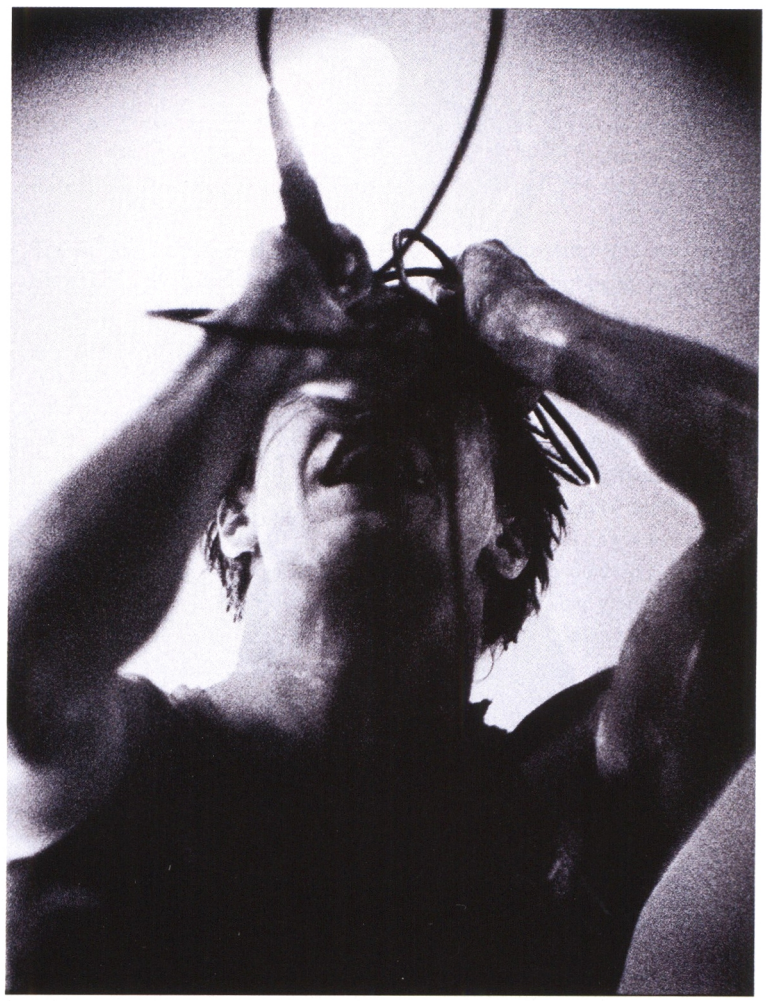
THE NOTORIOUS SHORT FILM FOR *BROKEN* CIRCULATED AS A BOOTLEG, IN KIND OF A VIRAL WAY, AFTER A VHS COPY OF IT LEAKED. HOW DID YOU FEEL WHEN IT GOT OUT THERE?

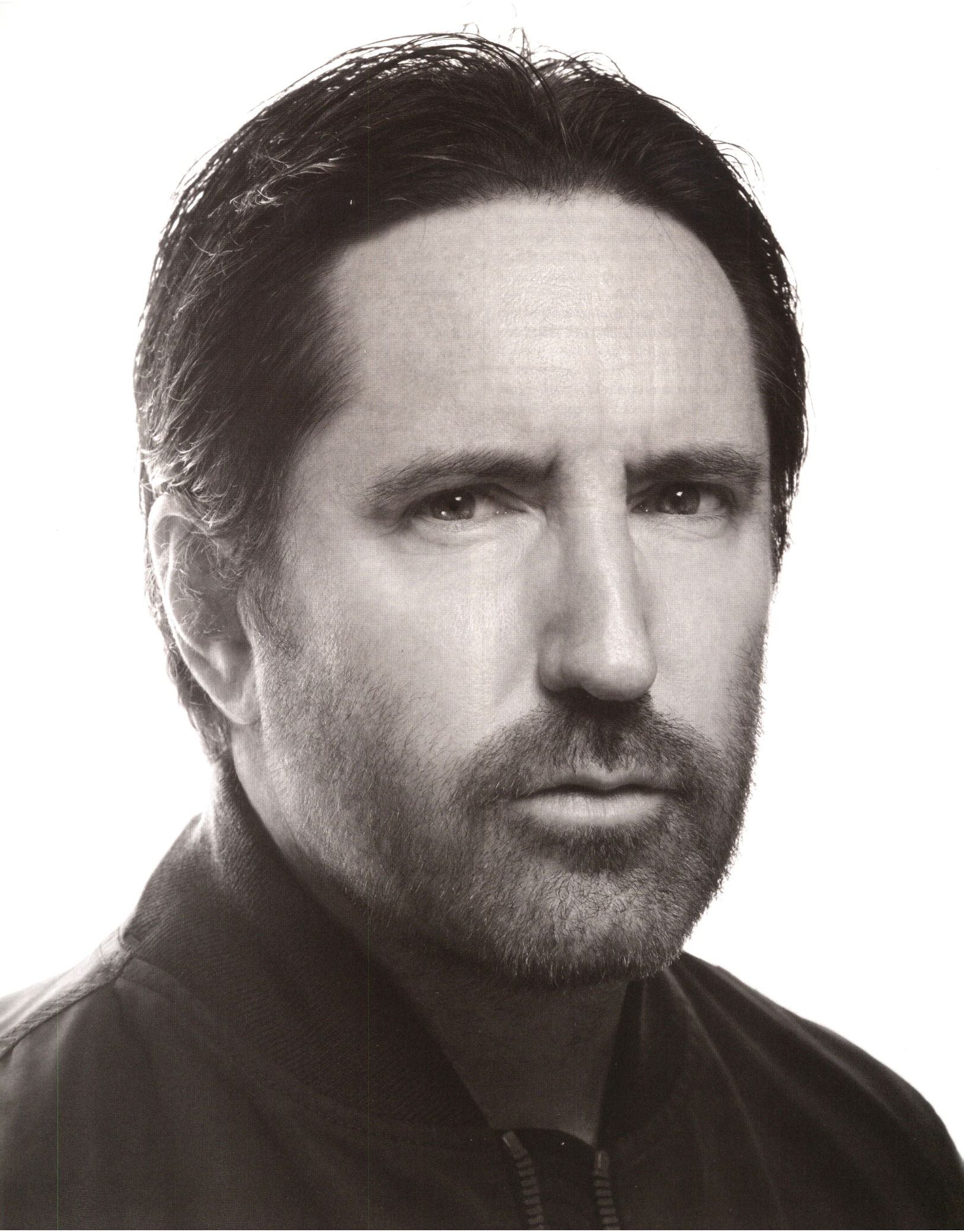
REZNOR Peter Christopherson [*founding member of Throbbing Gristle and Coil and director of the* Broken *movie*] and I had become friends, and we liked the idea that, Could we do something extreme here? And the record label was foolish enough to give me some money to do it. He was like, "We could film this backbone that ties these videos together and make it feel like a snuff film." It sounded cool, and if anyone was going to pull it off, I thought he could do that.

I got an unlabeled brown bag in the mail with a cassette and no label on it. And he's like, "I didn't want to put any kind of information on it in case it got confiscated." And I watched it and it was like, "Holy *fuck*." And then we talked on the phone and his being unsure was what influenced me mostly [to not release it], and it was the right thing. And I thought, I'm living in the fucking Tate house. [*From 1992 to 1993, Reznor lived and recorded in the house where the Charles Manson "family" killed actress Sharon Tate and four others in 1969.*] It felt like this isn't the right thing to do. So then it just sat for a while. And I know exactly how it leaked because we made a few copies, and each one had a glitch in a different spot. And I'm sure the one that leaked I gave to Gibby Haynes [of the Butthole Surfers]. I mean, that's what we wanted to have happen anyway, in the big picture, you know what I mean?

HOW MANY DID YOU END UP GIVING OUT TO YOUR FRIENDS?

REZNOR It was maybe six. I remember a small handful, but for some reason I was sure it was his that is the one. I'm choosing to believe that.





"What I was most scared of: blank notebook. You know: Go! Write your best song! But I found I actually enjoyed the process. I could go in and say, 'This may not be the best thing I've ever done, but I'm gonna try it, and no one has to hear it, and it can go in that pile over there.'" — Reznor

2019 MARKED THE 25TH ANNIVERSARY OF NINE INCH NAILS' FAMOUS MUD-COVERED WOODSTOCK '94 PERFORMANCE: WHEN DID YOU REALIZE THAT THE MUD WAS ACTUALLY PISS AND SHIT FROM THE PORTA-POTTIES?

REZNOR Not before the show. We were so fucking scared to play that show. And we did it purely because they were paying us a lot of money. I remember when it came up as an offer it was like, "This looks shitty." Pepsi logo on a wood guitar neck. It felt kinda gross. But the justification was we spent so much on production for the *Downward Spiral* tour, if we played that show, it paid for all the other shows to have cool production. And when we got there, it felt much more legit. It's hard to explain why. But we'd also got in the night before and we stayed overnight, and then we had all day to kind of wait until our slot. And it just felt like anxiety mounting, you know.

And then when we got in the mud backstage, it just suddenly felt like, OK, now it feels OK. We weren't thinking about E. coli or anything at the time. But when we were onstage, it's one of those things I can say with absolute certainty. When lightning strikes, you don't know when that's gonna happen — that zeitgeisty, being at the right place at the right time. We knew onstage, whatever is happening — unless it was the turd germs infecting my brain — it felt like, This is important. We're right where we need to be, and this is it. And I don't say that arrogantly. I just mean you could feel it in a weird way. I haven't felt it like that since then. The performance was shitty, you know. It's hard to sing with shit in your eyes, trying to hold onto guitar strings. But it was coming from an authentic, real place.

***REVOLVER* DID A PIECE ABOUT *DOWNWARD SPIRAL*'S "CLOSER" TURNING INTO AN UNLIKELY STRIP CLUB ANTHEM. HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT THAT PARTICULAR LEGACY OF THAT SONG?**

REZNOR You learn that once you release your child into the world, you're kind of powerless as to where it winds up or what people think of it. I remember at one point early on, I was kind of, "You don't get it! That's not what the fucking song's [about]! It's the opposite of that!"

I haven't been in a strip club recently, but, um, it is what it is. I've heard Sting bitching about, "'Every Breath You Take' isn't a love song." To a lot of people it is. I don't like to get into arguing about what the lyrics really mean, because it doesn't really matter if somebody interprets them as something else. I'm glad it's not, like, a fucking sports anthem.

DID YOU EVER HEAR MICHAEL JACKSON WAS A FAN OF YOUR MUSIC?

REZNOR I had never heard that.

HAVE YOU EVER HEARD HIS SONG "MORPHINE" FROM 1997?

REZNOR I don't think I have. I'm not a deep-cut Michael Jackson guy.

[*Ross pulls the song up on his phone.*]

ROSS It would imply that he's listening.

REZNOR That's where I ripped that off from! [*Laughs*]

AT THIS POINT, YOU'VE SUCCEEDED MUSICALLY, FINANCIALLY AND ARTISTICALLY. WHY DO YOU BOTHER DOING ANY OF THIS RIGHT NOW? WHY DO YOU EVEN WANT TO MAKE MUSIC AND PLAY SHOWS, AS OPPOSED TO JUST KICKING YOUR FEET UP IN HAWAII AND HANGING OUT WITH YOUR KIDS?

REZNOR It seems to me when I look back at my life, the thing that made me feel good was playing the piano when I was a kid. And then realizing, Yeah, I feel self-worth in what I'm doing 'cause I feel connected to it and I feel like I'm good at it, and it seems like other people think I'm good at it. And whatever that was gave me something I wasn't getting from the other parts of my life. And it kind of trained me that working towards something can reap benefits, lead to something that made me feel OK about myself. And when I discovered rock music, the rebellion of it, coming from a small town, it felt like, This is my thing. Maybe that can help me find my place.

In the little world I was in back then, if you played in a band you played at the bar down the street and you played cover tunes of what was on the radio. So I did some of that. I got that feeling of being onstage and this feels like me — but what do I have to say? I kicked the can down the road a bit 'cause I was afraid to see. I was afraid. What if I'm a shitty writer? And that led to working on what was gonna be Nine Inch Nails and honing in on discovering what I had to say. It wasn't posturing behind other things I like, but it was turning to this journal of what was going on in my head. But how could that be? I can't let anyone else see that. That became the lyrics of the first songs. When I sheepishly hand it over to somebody, my friend at the time, he's like, "This is fucking great." I couldn't look him in the eye. And I realized ... if I can express this thing that's in me ... have the courage to do that. Even though it's scarier 'cause it wasn't Gene Simmons doing it. Fuck, it was *me*. I hadn't created a kind of persona that I could hide behind. The feeling I got from seeing it affect people or touch people: This is my thing. [*Laughs*]

Then as the band started to take off and you're now thrust from this little life into another unfamiliar life and being treated differently, and not being emotionally equipped to deal with that, I turned to numbing myself. Then that catches up with me. Like, when fame kicked in on *Downward Spiral*, it was super weird. And I never had time to kind of sit back for a minute and say, "What is it actually happening right now?" I enjoyed it, but I didn't get to take a breath to be able to say, I should appreciate this moment because it's not forever. It felt to me like every dream comes true, and it's followed immediately by, "Oh, fuck, now what? I'm a fraud. How am I ever gonna do *that* again? How did I even write that song? I don't even know how I did that. Was that me?" And being recognized places. You know, I feel like I'm on fire, usually, when I'm around other people. Now, I *really* don't know who the fuck I am. Should I be a "rock star"? You know, that wasn't a bad word back then. I started defining myself by what I'd read about myself and drinking too much and just becoming something I didn't wanna be.

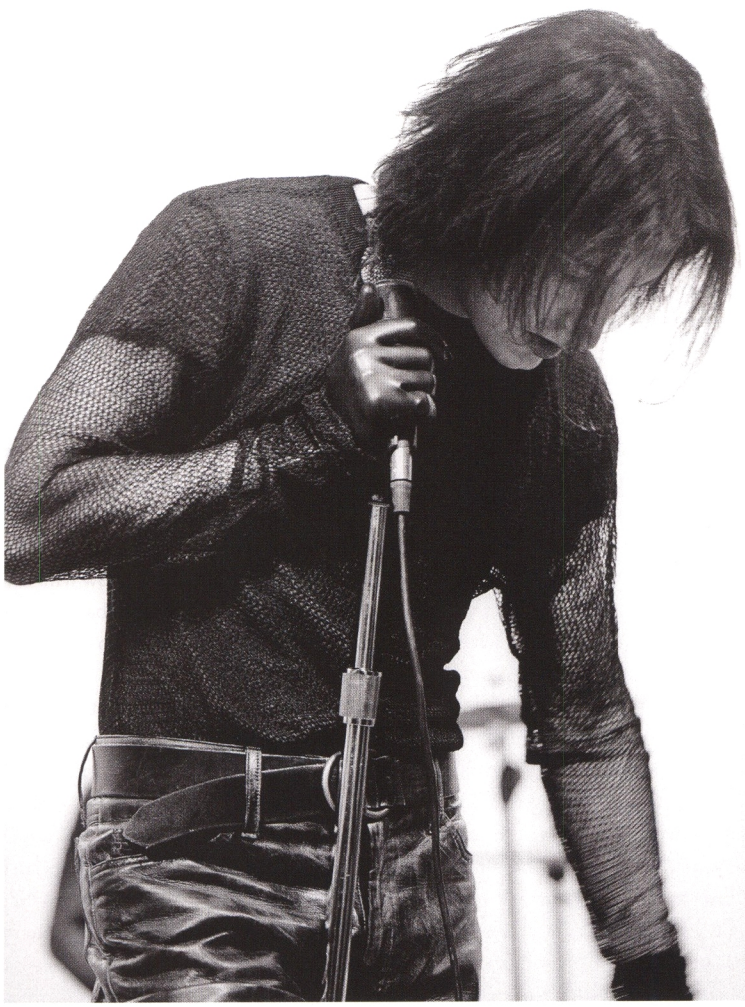
Anyway, glossing over some of the gore of that story. But, coming out the other end, reaching a place where I had to change or I would be dead. I was at a point where I hated myself, and I didn't respect myself, and I didn't trust myself. I could tell my art was suffering 'cause I can't think straight. Reaching out for help, getting help. Finally, being at a point where I had to truly surrender. ... When I had a couple of years sobriety and I started to feel in touch with myself. I thought about, Can I write music sober? Have I ever? All that glamorizing and romanticizing that you told yourself you need it. Do I wanna try? And the answer's, yeah, I do wanna try because I wanna know if I can do it. That was incentive then. I wanna just see if I *can* do it. That's what turned into [2005's] *With Teeth*. And what I found was, what

I used to be the most scared of: blank notebook. You know: Go! Write your best song! But what I found this time, I actually enjoyed the process. And I could go in and say, "This may not be the best thing I've ever done, but I'm gonna try it, and no one has to hear it, and it can go in that pile over there." My brain was working again, and I felt excited about it. The first day you start getting over a cold, you know what I mean? Like, "Fuck, yeah! Shirt off! I'm going swimming!" It felt like that for months. I got reacquainted with the process and myself and felt re-energized and excited. And realizing I could tour sober and remember what happened. And now it becomes about being onstage instead of, "I have to be onstage so I can get to the thing after." I enjoyed that side of it.

The other kind of destructive thing that happened was when I got sucked into Apple. I had been talking with [*producer and Interscope Records co-founder*] Jimmy Iovine about streaming services ... and this is six, seven years ago. I thought if someone could be representing artists in that world ... but equally as important to me is, could the experience [of streaming] for people be less like a card catalog? ... That got me into developing Beats Music with Jimmy. Then Apple bought Beats Music 'cause they're behind Spotify. Now, I'm being invited to sit at the table with a guy that designed iTunes, and Tim Cook [*Apple CEO*], and Eddy Cue [*Apple's senior vice president of Internet Software and Services*], and Jimmy, and Jony Ive [*former Apple Chief Design Officer*], [saying] "What's your ideas for how we can make this a place that respects musicians? How would you like to design the new Apple Music based on Beats? Um, and we'll give you a *truckload* of money to do it."

What's involved? "Well, we'll need you up here a few times a week. We don't want you to tour. You need to be accessible. You can put a record out, and we'll allow you to do a film score a year. Four years." As a musician, I can tell how much money I'm gonna make. But I'm not in that game. I'm not trying to compete with Drake, nor am I interested in that. I don't particularly wanna tour eight months of the year with a family at my age. Or even if I wasn't my age. [*Laughs*] It caused some real looks in the mirror: What am I doing this for? What matters? Money matters, yes. It's a realistic, pragmatic thing to consider. I've got a family now, you know.

Anyway, I did it. I learned a lot of stuff. The key thing being: I *can do* that and I was successful at that. *And* ... I don't wanna do that. I felt guilty every single day because I felt like the thing I'm really meant to do, that I love to do, I'm kind of betraying to answer a question: Could I do this other thing, and to get money, and to hopefully effect change in something I do care about. Someone's gotta do it. No one else seems to be fucking stepping up to the plate. Anyway, a lot of that was



"March of the Pigs" video shoot, 1994

"When I discovered rock music, the rebellion of it, coming from a small town, it felt like, This is my thing. Maybe that can help me find my place. And I realized if I can express this thing that's in me, have the courage to do that. The feeling I got seeing it affect people or touch people: This is my thing." — Reznor

hubris, and a lot of it was wishful thinking and underestimating how tough it is to move a bureaucracy and the power of the politics of big corporations. I'm not talking shit, but it made my job become much more of a political one than one of effecting change. And that shit I really would rather not have to do if I don't have to. It's not what I wake up thinking about doing.

I come out the other end of it with, No, I don't wanna renew my contract. And I have to go back to being an artist. And not that I wasn't doing stuff during that time anyway, but I felt like I was on call. And every time my phone would ring, I'd [*panicked stammering*]. I'd rather not feel that way.

Atticus has been not only a good companion but a good friend, and he'll drop words of wisdom, and one of them, one of his phrases [is] "You know what? When it comes down to it, all I wanna do is just not feel bad." It seems kind of moronic and simple until you think about it.

And that's been my whole life. I just don't wanna feel bad. And I've learned in my years that there's things I can do that make me feel good. ... When we're in here working on something, and it's finished, and then we go, "That is fucking great, man. I can't wait for people to hear it." That's the moment where it's like, We're doing what we're supposed to do. Maybe no one will listen to that amazing hi-hat pattern and fucking scratch their beard about it, but we hope someone does because we've thought about that fucking thing.

I can't go on vacation and just relax. I need to be doing something that makes me feel connected. I'm trying to be a good parent. I'm trying to be a good husband. And the other piece of that puzzle is I need to feel tapped into working on things that I find interesting.

SO, IT DOES GO BACK TO THAT KID PLAYING A PIANO.

REZNOR I mean, right now we're being tasked with a thing for Pixar. It's pretty tough. It's an emotionally complex scene that I've been thinking about for about a week. But, when I think about it, I think about me as a kid playing piano and how I felt. 'Cause it also kind of taps into that same emotion that needs to be conveyed. We've got a piano in my house where I just sit and kind of fucking think about it. I feel like there's something in me I need to get out ... And if I see that people in the outside world respond to it, [it] feels like that's why I'm here, I think. Make lots of kids and do that thing.

CHRISTOPHER POLK/GETTY IMAGES

ACRYLIC, INK, ENAMEL AND GOUACHE ON PAPER MOUNTED ONTO BIRCH BOARD

Thomas Hooper

Inspired by the lyrics of Nine Inch Nails' "Into the Void" as "voids, absence, space and loss of form play important roles in my work."